Dear Julie,

Wow! I can’t believe that you will be leaving in less than a week. Thanks for your recent response to the second letter I sent; I really appreciated your thoughts on how important it is to reflect on your own story as a way to prepare for your time studying off-campus. As you noted, when you share parts of your life story with your fellow group members, you lay the groundwork to build a strong group foundation.

This is nothing new, as you know from your time on campus. It has always been important at Calvin to create an environment that empowers each student to foster and be a part of a Christian community. Henry Nouwen (a noted Catholic priest and favorite writer of mine) asks us: “Do we have a circle of trustworthy friends where we feel safe enough to be intimately known and called to an always greater maturity?” I believe that as you study off-campus you need a community that pushes you and holds you accountable in many areas of your life (academically, physically, emotionally, and spiritually).

Yet, I truly feel that the benefits of creating strong relationships with your fellow students do not end there. Having a solid, supportive group can create an environment that encourages you to venture out, perhaps on your own to meet and engage with strangers you meet along your way, which I think will magnify the benefits of your overall off-campus experience.

The need to engage “the other” is also a part of seeing your experience as a pilgrimage. The Bible is full of stories related to being open to others who are different; one that is especially relevant given our discourse is the story of Jesus joining travelers on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection (found in Luke 24: 13-25). One of the reasons that I like this passage is that it focuses our attention on humbly walking with others while also celebrating the opportunity to engage with strangers.

As we can see from this passage, Jesus walked with his fellow travelers and met them where they were and gently nudges them to grow and remember his promises. I love the idea of walking with others, as I think is serves as a great metaphor as we venture out in humility and curiosity. In addition, when traveling internationally, walking is often an important means of traveling and exploring the places where we live and visit. Walking allows for, even encourages, fellowship, conversations, intimacy with the surroundings, and the ability to see a place in its true form. Walking allows us to go at a pace that encourages us to notice God’s creation, to foster meaningful conversation, and most importantly to meet, fellowship, and walk in stride with those we meet.

Just as on the road to Emmaus, we need to welcome the stranger into our midst. As Jim Forest states in his book *The Road to Emmaus: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life: “*Again and again we meet strangers along the way who speak with unexpected clarity about things that really matter. At the heart of the Emmaus story is the stranger. Pilgrimage is not possible if it excludes people found along the way. Perhaps it is only for an hour or a day. A hesitant conversation takes wing. A reluctant tongue becomes fluent. Finally, we eat together. By now, the stranger has become a named person – Jose, Carl, or Ahmad, Maria, Larissa, or Teresa. Sooner or later we part, but we remember that encounter as a shining moment. We didn’t literally meet Jesus risen from the dead, and yet, in this brief communion with a stranger, Jesus became present and traveled with us. Ideas about Jesus were replaced with an experience with Jesus. – Thus, being a pilgrim, on the road to Emmaus, is to be open to contact, willing to share stories, willing to talk about the real issues in one’s life, willing to listen with undivided attention.” Although differences in languages and cultures can be obstacles, they can be overcome as we humbly and sincerely seek to meet others wherever they may be. This is true both for strangers you meet allow the way but also for your fellow classmates as you get to know one another better over the course of your experience.

Differences are identified and respected and similarities are found-- what an exciting opportunity, if you are willing to share and listen (and perhaps endure some awkward moments). Part of the beauty of being open to where God leads is you never know where you will end up. Consider an email I received from one of our program directors that offers some of the possibilities of your off-campus experience.

*Megan is sick and in the hospital. It happened quite quickly as her Ghanaian roommate Khadija brought her to the campus health clinic last night. This morning she was far more comfortable than yesterday, and her temperature has been normal all day.  She is still very weak, but that's always the case when malaria strikes.  Megan is in no danger and is receiving good medical care.  She's also being very closely attended by other Calvin students and Khadija. One of the Calvin students actually slept in her room last night and another will take a turn tonight. In addition, Khadija continues to spend a lot of time with her.*

*Khadija and Megan have become close friends, and the religious difference--Khadija is Muslim--has only made them more eager to understand each other.  When I returned to Megan's room last night, I found Khadija sitting at Megan's bedside reading to her from the Bible.  Khadija also bowed her head and prayed with us before I left.  Megan is such a warm and thoughtful young woman that I'm sure any roommate assigned to her would soon become a good friend, but these two have built an unusually strong relationship.*

What a wonderful picture of what God might have in store for you as you leave next week. In some ways this story is an especially good anecdote because Megan is the recipient of care and attention rather than the donor. This turns upside down the normal pattern of thought for most of us who see ourselves as the giver and also the one with the power, doling out kindness to the “natives.” It allows us to not only ask the question of who is my neighbor but challenges us to ask who is a neighbor to me. We can often be a blessing to others by simply being good recipients.

I know there are risks involved. Challenges like homesickness, physical sickness, emotional strain, rejection, but meeting and taking these risks with humility and grace, knowing God is in control, offers a world of possibilities.

Blessings,

Don

Questions for you:

Henry Nouwen, (who I quoted earlier) is a strong proponent for leading a reflective and contemplative life. In order to reach this goal, he encourages each of us to develop the three disciplines of the contemplative life to live our lives to the fullest (see below).

1. Do you agree with Nouwen’s disciplines of the contemplative life? Do you think that a contemplative life is important to having a great experience while studying off-campus?
2. How might you develop the discipline of solitude in your life as you study off-campus? How might you grow in your relationship with God?
3. How might the discipline of community be applied to both your internal group of students as well as those you will meet on the way? What are some of your ideas to build community with your fellow classmates? What are some of your ideas to build community with those you will meet (e.g. host families, other students, strangers) along the way?
4. Do you think you should have a discipline of ministry while you study off-campus? Explain your answer.
5. If you do think you should have a discipline of ministry, what would you say your ministry is? What are some of your ideas to build a discipline of ministry while you are away? How might connecting and building relationships with strangers be a part of this ministry?

Henry Nouwen’s three disciplines of a contemplative life:

* *The discipline of solitude. It’s only in solitude that we can get in touch with the Spirit of God in us. Solitude is an important discipline in a busy world. Solitude involves prayer, spiritual reading, and being alone with God. It allows us to build our relationship with God, to get in touch with what He is doing in our lives.*
* *The discipline of community. Out of solitude we go into community. Community is not just a place where we do things together, but a place where together we recognize the presence of God…Community, whether a family, a church, a class, or an intentional community, is where people build relationships with each other in order to discover in each other the presence of God. For your upcoming experiences, this includes your fellow classmates as well as people you meet along the way.*
* *The discipline of ministry, reaching out to others. Its’ important to reach out to others because we want to share from the abundance of our life, not because we have a need to be good helpers or because we have something to prove, but rather because God calls us to be in relationship with each other and to be his eyes, ears, hands and feet in this world, asking: How can I be a blessing to others I meet and let others be a blessing to me?*